

PREVENTING A “LOST GENERATION”: EDUCATION FOR REFUGEE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The surge in immigration over the last years presents a challenge to the educational system as the number of language learners has tremendously increased. Language barriers prevent these students from immediately integrating into regular classes, thus they are often enrolled in special “international classes” beforehand to first foster language acquisition. Additionally, these students often lack content knowledge due to instability in prior schooling, hindering them from participating in age-appropriate regular classes. The project “Biology for Everyone” currently teaches science to these newly arrived students at three partner schools combining action-oriented and hands-on science learning with subject-specific language learning. The concomitant research uses a longitudinal interview to examine students’ perception of the project in terms of content learning, its potential benefits, and the integration process. Results indicate that students experience an easier integration into the mainstream science classroom after taking part in the project.

Key words: Educating refugee students, integration, longitudinal interview study, science education

1. Introduction

Due to recent political crises, the number of refugees coming to Europe has significantly increased. As children have the right to be educated (UN-KRK, 1989) a large number of students enter the educational system without speaking the language of instruction. Therefore, many schools in Germany founded separate language learning or integration classes (often called “international” or “welcome” classes) to foster language acquisition before integrating into the “normal” education system (Crul et al., 2016). Different models of these integration classes exist

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in Germany and each school can decide how they organize the classes. For instance, some schools solely teach German, whereas others offer a variety of different subject courses (Schmiedebach & Wegner, 2018a). One might argue that language acquisition is the most important part of the integration process; however, many refugee students did not have continuous education in their home country due to political instability, which might hinder integration (Nilsson Folke, 2017). This is crucial for subjects that strongly build on prior knowledge (e.g. math, foreign languages). Moreover, Nilsson and Axelsson (2013) found that such students deal with subject-specific language issues, such as writing lab reports and extracting information from tables and figures, which are usually not part of the regular language learning courses. In order to help recently immigrated students, the project “Biology for Everyone” was established in summer 2016 (Schmiedebach & Wegner, 2018a) and uses a multi-paradigmatic approach complimenting practical implementation with empirical research.

2. “Biology for Everyone”

The main idea of the project is to create an action-oriented class that focuses on both language and content learning. Since there is no mandatory curriculum or standard concept for science teaching in integration classes in Germany, we created four points to use as didactical orientation for other practitioners and researchers to follow:

- *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL) is a well-established concept for bilingual education in Europe, which uses a dual-focus approach on both language and content learning (Ohlberger & Wegner, 2017; cf. Wolff, 2013). Hence, our project integrates German language learning in science education by looking at both aspects simultaneously to avoid holding separate German lessons during the science lesson (Schmiedebach & Wegner, 2018c, 2019a; Schmiedebach, Menze & Wegner, 2018). For instance, this could be defining rules for writing a lab protocol (e.g. using present tense, informal expressions, etc.) or repeating new vocabulary at the beginning of each lesson.
- Planning the lessons using the *scientific method* is one of the most critical didactical concepts in science teaching (Wegner & Schmiedebach, 2017). The students develop a question for everyday-life phenomena (e.g. “Why do we have to brush our teeth?”), create hypotheses (e.g. “If we do not brush our teeth daily, they will get damaged.”), test them in an experiment (e.g. comparing an egg with toothpaste and one without in vinegar), formulate their observations, and then relate them to the initial question. Experiments are the central element of the scientific method; previous research shows

that language learners value hands-on-experiments since they decrease the language barrier, allowing them to easily understand the content (cf. Figure 1) (Schmiedebach & Wegner 2018b).



Figure 1 (from left to right): A student builds a car with everyday materials; three students testing the strength of Velcro

- Increasing the tasks from *action to erudite language* (Leisen, 2015). In terms of language learning, a general approach is to start with action-language (e.g. talking during an experiment about the performed actions) and then slowly transitioning to erudite language (e.g. having a classroom discussion about the experiment with the teacher introducing new scientific terms, writing a protocol, reading a text) (cf. Figure 2) (Schmiedebach & Wegner 2018b).

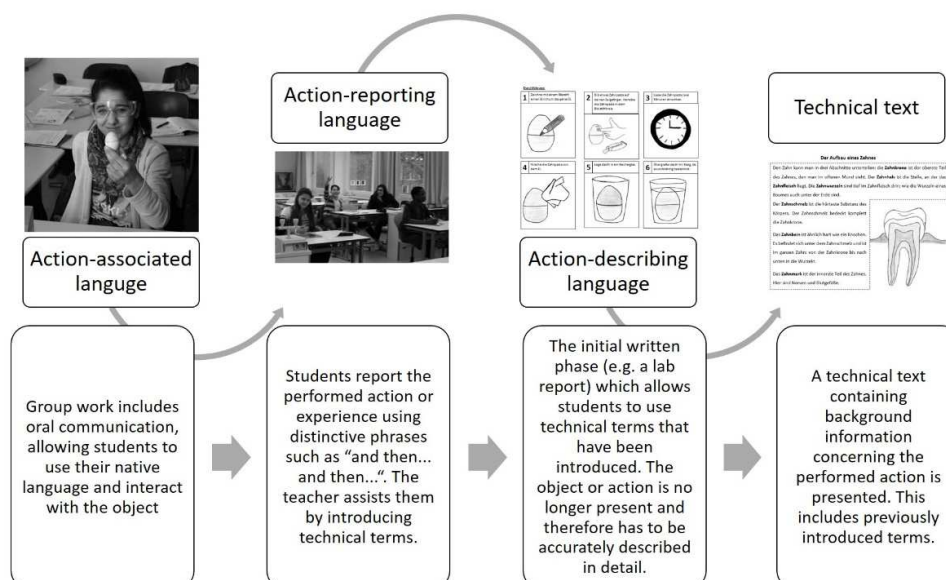


Figure 2: The students develop erudite language during a teaching unit. With action-oriented lessons they start with action-associated language while conducting an experiment. Afterwards, they talk about the experiment in a class discussion, write about it, and read a technical text.

The *national science curriculum* serves as a guideline. Since these students will eventually participate in the regular science classroom with German students, we aim to cover similar topics.

3. Methodology

Our project is a longitudinal study focusing on the students' perception of science education and integration into the mainstream classroom. At three different time points, guideline-based interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analysed according to Mayring's (2010) content-analysis. Furthermore, on the basis of qualitative data, a questionnaire was developed and piloted to substantiate the findings (cf. Figure 3). The current article describes the last set of interviews and focuses on a retrospective view of the project and the integration process.

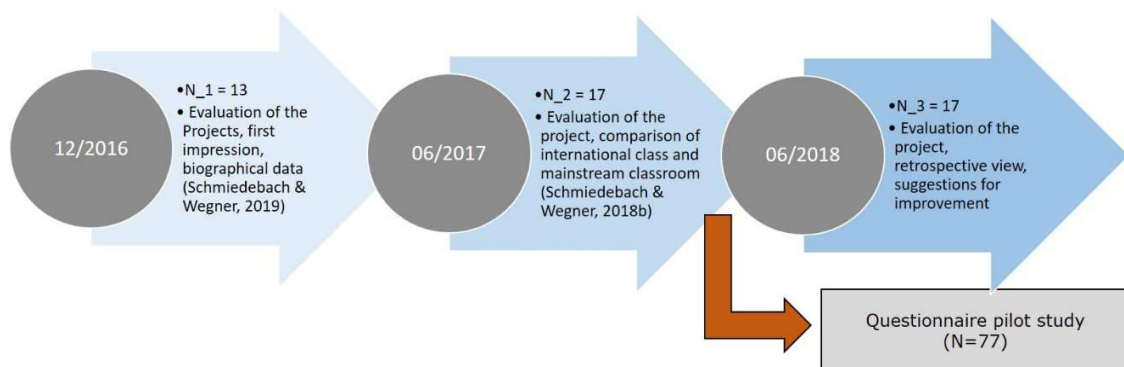


Figure 3. Longitudinal research in “Biology for Everyone” with a focus on qualitative interviews.

The third survey focuses on the following research questions:

- How do the students retrospectively evaluate the project “Biology for Everyone”?
- How do the students describe the integration process into the mainstream classroom? What barriers are they confronted with? What advantages do they have as a result of participating in “Biology for Everyone”?
- What suggestions do they have for future integration classes?

3.1. Participants

Participant selection was influenced by several factors, such as legal factors (e.g. signed consent form by a legal guardian) and required language competence. Furthermore, there are students that have left or entered the school, portrayed as “drop-outs” or “drop-ins”. Changes in the interviewed students are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant overview including gender, age, country of origin, native language (L1) and date of enrolment in the German school

Participant	Gender	Age	Country of origin	L1	Enrollment in the German school	CEFR	Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
1	m	12	Iraq	Kurdish	May 2016	B1	Y	Y	Y
2	f	14	Kazakhstan	Russian	May 2016	B2	Y	Y	Y
3	m	16	Syria	Kurdish	November 2015	A2	Y	Y	N
4	f	14	Iraq	Kurdish	March 2016	B1	Y	Y	Y
5	m	13	Croatia	Croatian	March 2016	B1	Y	Y	Y
6	f	14	Iraq	Kurdish	Not specified	B1	Y	Y	Y
7	f	12	Iraq	Kurdish	Not specified	A2	Y	Y	Y
8	m	16	Syria	Arabic	November 2015	B1	Y	Y	Y
9	f	13	Iraq	Kurdish	April 2016	B1	Y	N	Y
10	f	14	Iraq	Kurdish	May 2016	B1	Y	Y	Y
11	f	16	Iraq	Kurdish	May 2016	B1	Y	Y	Y
12	f	17	Kenia	Swahili	May 2016	A2	Y	Y	Y
13	m	13	Russia	Russian	May 2016	A2	Y	Y	N
14	f	16	Croatia	Croatian, Albanian, Serbian	March 2016	B1	N	Y	Y
15	m	16	Iraq/ Kurdistan	Kurdish	May 2016	A2	N	Y	N
16	f	11	Iraq	Arabic	March 2016	A2	N	Y	Y
17	f	15	Iraq	Kurdish	April 2016	B1	N	Y	Y
18	m	17	Iraq	Kurdish	February 2016	A1	N	Y	N
19	m	16	Syria	Arabic	December 2017	A2	N	N	Y
20	m	17	Iraq	Kurdish	May 2017	A2	N	N	Y
21	f	16	Syria	Arabic	November 2015	A2	N	N	Y

3.2. Data collection

Guideline-based interviews from twelve female and five male students were conducted in the third survey. The interviews took place in a private room in the school by the same interviewer in all three interviews to ensure comparability. During the interviews, students had access to dictionaries in their native language and questions could be repeated, paraphrased, or skipped if necessary. Interviews were recorded with the recorder Olympus LS-14 as *.mp3-files and lasted between 28 and 67 minutes. Afterwards, they were anonymously transcribed with the program f4 according to standards described by Kuckartz et al. (2008). These transcribed interviews were analysed by Mayring's qualitative content analysis using the method of summarizing (Mayring,

2010), which looks at each case separately using three main steps of paraphrasing, generalizing, and categorizing.

4. Results

4.1. Experience in the international class

Since the participants' perception of the international class in this study is congruent to previous studies (Schmiedebach & Wegner 2018b, Schmiedebach & Wegner 2019b), this section highlights findings used for further discussion. Most students in the third survey were enrolled in an international class for two years and are about to transfer, or have just recently transferred into the regular classroom. Nearly all of them have experienced a few hours in the regular classroom and now know what to expect. They tend to reflect on their international class as a kind of "special education": the teachers use low-level language instructions, the students have more time to understand content, they receive (more) individual support during class, and grades do not play a major role to advance their school career.

Empathy and support from the teacher for both the individual and the class as a whole is an integral component for success. It is often the case that international students in regular classes have the feeling that teachers are less capable of explaining content on their linguistic level, as they tailor their needs to the majority of the class (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013). However, the international class teachers in our project are aware of the students' language competences and use appropriate words and sentence structures. Not only does this tremendously help students when listening to concepts, but it also helps in the writing process (see participant 1). Giving detailed instructions for writing a basic text profits the entire international class (Birnbaum, Erichsen, Fuchs, Ahrenholz, 2018).

P1 #Ja# sie haben auch mit einfache Wörter gemacht, damit wir auch verstehen (.) und so deswegen haben wir (schlechter?) und sie haben auch uns geholfen (...) zu Texte zu schreiben. #Yes# they have done it with easy words, so that we understand (.) and therefore we have (worse?) and they also have helped us to (...) write texts.

Due to similar circumstances, the students understand each other well and form strong bonds within the class. Moreover, since they are all learning the same language and pursuing the same goal, they are therefore goal-oriented, which can increase language acquisition motivation (Schlak et al., 2002). Many participants talk about their class as a "family" where they do not

have to feel ashamed since they know each other for a long time and can relate to the difficulty when learning German.

- P10** [...] danach sind wir jetzt zwei Jahre zusammen [...] then we are together for two years now (.)
(.) und dann habe wir uns gut kennengelernt (.) and then we have got to know each other well (.)
und wir sind nur wie, kann man sagen, eine Familie. and we are just like, one can say, a family.

Using the scientific method works well for the students to understand content and improve the language they are learning. Many of them find that the exercise of writing observations down helps them develop their German. Participant 7 portrays the importance of CLIL:

- P7** [...] zum Beispiel von den Experiment müssen [...] for example, from the experiments we have
wir sch// beschreiben (.) und die Sachen zum to wri// describe (.) and the things for example I
Beispiel weiß nicht wie die sind// also was sollen don't know how they are// well what we shall
wir schreiben (.) also [Name des Lehrers] hilft write (.) so [name of the teacher] helps me (.) and
mir (.) und dann später so weiß ich was das ist then later I know how it works and well (.) yes.
und so (.) ja. Das ist halt// man kann so Deutsch That's just// thus, one can learn German.
lernen.

This teaching method provides alternative routes for students to learn and express themselves. One student in particular, feels that these lessons are unique to regular lessons:

- P4** [...] ich hatte irgendwie andre Gefühl, weil [...] I had somehow a different feeling, because
internationale kann man besser lernen, also viele international one can learn better, well many
Wörter, man lernt äh viele neues Wörter von words, one learns eh many new words of the
deutscher Sprach halt ähm, aber äh (.) German language ehm, but eh (.) compared to
vergleichen mit der Regelklasse ist es ganz the regular class it is much different, when the eh
anders, wenn die äh (.) in der normale Klasse (.) in the normal class they teach totally different
unterrichten ganz anders als wir. than us.

More importantly, the students strongly value the hands-on activities, stating that the content is easy to understand and that it is a lot of fun to conduct experiments and encounter living animals. Participant 6 describes these multidimensional aspects; she has fun conducting experiments, while at the same time she learns and reads about the content. Her description can be linked to our *action to erudite language* approach, which appears to be a well-liked teaching concept.

- P6** Als wir haben die Autosexperimente gemacht, When we did the car experiments, this was nice.
das war schön. (lacht) [...] Also äh wir hatten (laughing) [...] Well eh we actually did
eigentlich Experimente gemacht, gelernt, experiments, learnt, read, had fun. (.) Four things
gelesen, Spaß gemacht. (.) Vier Sachen together.
zusammen.

In general, the students have a positive attitude towards being in the international class. They feel safe to study German, they understand the content, and experience a lot of teacher and peer

support during the lessons (cf. Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013). However, the students seem to be tired of the international class; although it is only temporary, it lasts for two years.

P17 Ähm (..) das [die internationale Klasse, MS] war zuerst für uns gilt// äh gut (..) und jetzt äh (..) wir wollen eine Abschluss und (..) sowas haben. Ehm (..) this [the international class, MS] was gui// good for us first (..) and now eh (..) we want a diploma and (..) something like this.

Additionally, the international class does not offer a diploma, which is usually needed to find a job. The students eventually want to leave the international class and create a meaningful future. In Nilsson Folke's (2017) study, students from language introductory programmes, such as the international class, argue that these classes prevent them from reaching their goals since they do not feel like they are moving forward in their career.

P4 Ich finde es ist// es reicht langsam in internationale Klasse. Man soll sich ein bisschen bewegen und zeigen, was man kann. I think it is// it's enough with the international class. One should move a bit and show what one can do.

The international class is experienced as stagnation (cf. Thommesson, Corcoran & Todd, 2015; Nilsson Folke, 2017). Students have high aspirations and are keen in demonstrating their capabilities. Some students try to process their past by giving their future a strong meaning. For example, participant 4 talks about either educating the world about the genocide of Yazidis by the IS or to become a lawyer to bring justice to the world.

4.2. Transitioning into the mainstream class

Although a transition process exists, there is no evaluation of a transition model (Schmiedebach & Wegner 2018). Schools can decide to provide a full-integration upon arrival, a partial-transition where students begin with a few subjects and increase the amount of hours in the regular class, or a total separation to concentrate on language acquisition before transitioning into the mainstream classes after two years (cf. Ahrenholz et al., 2016). The partner schools in our project use the partial-transition model. Previous findings indicate that students face many challenges when being partly integrated in the regular classes, from social issues in their German class (e.g. not finding friends) to language or cognitive issues (e.g. not understanding the teacher or having knowledge-gaps) (Schmiedebach & Wegner, 2018; cf. Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013). Since many students talk about these difficulties, we assumed that many students would favour a total separation until their German is nearly perfect. However, already integrated students argue to start the integration process early.

P6 Ab dem ersten Tag ist besser. [...] #Weil//# (..) also man wird also mit diese Klasse wie man sagt erwachsen [...] so Deutsch auch lernen von From the first day on is better. [...] #Because//# (..) well you become as one says grow up with the class [...] also German learn from them (..)

den (.) und nicht von den Angst haben (.) wie äh sich melden oder sowas, weil ich hatte immer (.) [...] nicht gemeldet (.) so viel.	and not being scared of them (.) like eh participating in class or something like that, because I always did not [...] raise my hand (.) much.
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In our previous interviews, many students talked about language-use anxiety in their regular class. They do not want to participate, since they fear that German students will make fun of their grammar. This anxiety is a wide-spread phenomenon (e.g. Havkic, Dohmann, Domenech & Niederhaus, 2018). Furthermore, social issues could dissipate if international students directly joined the regular class full-time instead of being there for only certain hours during the week. Many students see the (long-term) potential of social integration in a class with German peers (cf. Nilsson Folke, 2017):

P1 Damit die auch bisschen Kontakt zu Deutschen haben und bisschen miteinander sprechen und so Freunde sein (.) damit die auch später immer noch Freunde sein und von dann (.) wenn die nach der Schule gehen zum Beispiel dann hatten die keine Freunde, aber wenn die Regelklasse gehen, dann konnten die äh (.) Freunde haben.	So they have some contact with Germans and speak with them a bit and to be like friends (.) so they still be friends later and from then (.) when they leave school for example then they hadn't friends, but when they go into the regular classes, they could eh (.) have friends.
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4.3. After full-time integration: content, participation, language

One of the aims of this longitudinal study was to take a closer look at how the students experience integration with a focus on science education. Although only a few students were fully integrated in the regular class for the third survey, the data indicate that content learning in the international classes is beneficial in terms of content, language and participation.

In regular classes, international students tend to get frustrated as they often deal with negative grading situations (Maak, 2014). One solution is to give these students some kind of an advantage to help boost their grades. However, content-learning in international classes bypasses this problem, as the students have already learned the content and can now focus on the subject-specific language needed to excel in the subject. Using topics from the national science curriculum seems to benefit integration into regular classes as the students use their content knowledge and are rewarded with good grades. Participant 6 enthusiastically explains that she is a good biology student in her regular class. Now that she has participated in our project, she knows the current topic and has excellent grades. Even though she mentions problems in other subjects, she does not worry about biology since she already knows the content and can easily understand the lessons. Participant 1 experiences similar advantages in Physics.

- | | | |
|-----------|---|--|
| P6 | Ich bin// hab im Biologie eins und sonstige Weise die anderen Fächer nicht gut. | I am// have in biology a one [best grade in the German school system, MS] and otherwise the other subjects not good. |
| P1 | Ich finde das [den Physikunterricht, MS] gut, weil wir das Thema schon gemacht haben. Ich weiß das schon alles. | I find it [the physics lessons, MS] good because we already have done the topic. I already know this all. |
| I | Was macht ihr denn gerade? | What are you currently doing? |
| P1 | Äh über Stromkreis (..) und weil ich das schon (..) gut kenne, meld ich mich immer und weiß alles davon. | Eh about electric circuit (..) and because I already (..) know it well, I always raise my hand and know everything about it. |

Students also feel more confident to participate in the regular science class compared to other subjects where they lack content knowledge. Even though it is not required to know the content prior to the regular class, the students feel comfortable:

- | | | |
|-----------|---|--|
| I | Mhm und wie fühlt sich das an, wenn man das kann und die anderen nicht? | Mhm and how does it feel when you know something and the others don't? |
| P5 | Ja äh stolz bin ich, stolz (bin ich?). | Yes eh I am proud, (I am?) proud. |

Participating in class is still hard for many students, especially when they have experienced negative situations in class (Havkic et al., 2018). For example, participant 21 describes how hard it is for her to talk in class since her German classmates have laughed at her imperfect German. Despite that, she feels safe to communicate in biology:

- | | | |
|------------|---|---|
| P21 | Ja, da [im Biologieunterricht, MS] melden wir zu viel und die Lehrer äh// dann die Lehrer weiß, dass wir// diese Thema haben wir [in der internationalen Klasse, MS] gemacht. | Yes, there [in the biology lessons, MS] we raise our hands much and the teacher eh// then the teacher knows that we// this topic have we done [in the international class, MS]. |
| I | Mhm (..) und dann traust du dich auch, dich zu melden? | Mhm (..) and then you dare to raise your hand? |
| P21 | Ja. | Yes. |
| I | Warum? | Why? |
| P21 | Weil (4) //weil ich weiß, dass alles richtig ist und keiner lacht über mich. | Because (4) //because I know that everything is correct and nobody laughs about me. |

The third aspect of interest in our project is the extent to which students benefit language-wise. Many students who did not participate in an international class with content-learning subjects complain that they do not have the subject-specific vocabulary knowledge to succeed in class (Havkic et al., 2018). During our project, the students already mention an increase in subject-specific vocabulary in the first survey. After transitioning to the regular class, students experience all different subjects, along with specific vocabulary and text types:

- | | | |
|----------|--|---|
| I | Okay. (..) Mhm (..) wie ist das mit (..) der Sprache in Bio? (..) Ist die in Bio bisschen anders als (..) in | Okay. (..) Mhm (..) how is it with (..) the language in biology? (..) Is it a bit different in biology then |
|----------|--|---|

Politik (.) oder in Geschichte, in Deutsch?

(.) in politics (.) or in history, in German?

- P6** Es ist schon anderes und leichter auch, weil (..) in Bio //also (.) wir hatten bei [Name des Lehrers] alles die Wörter, die wir in Bio brauchen (.) gelernt. [...] Die Bakterien, Viren und (.) Antibiotika und viele andere Sachen. [...] Es gibt jede Fächer, es gibt andere Wörter (.) im Erdkunde, Biologie, im Geschichte (.) oder Geschichtseswörter also man braucht selber, die sind sehr äh (.) alte Wörter (.) und man versteht die nicht und die sind sehr schwer.
- It is different and easier too, because (..) in biology //well (.) we have (.) learnt all the words we need in biology with [name of the teacher]. The bacteria, viruses and (.) antibiotics and many other things. [...] There are every subject, there are different words (.) in geography, biology, in history (.) or history words you need too, they are very eh (.) old words (.) and you don't understand them and they are difficult.

Due to the content learned in the international class, participant 6 already knows science-related terms, making biology easier for her than history. Subject-specific words do not play the only role, it is also important to become familiar with specific types of texts. In his current physics class, participant 5 has to write lab protocols after conducting an experiment. He knew how to write a lab protocol and how to distinguish between observation and explanations because he has done it in our project before.

- P5** Äh (.) äh das [Fachunterricht in der internationalen Klassen, MS] hilft, weil äh eigentlich wusste ich nicht, was Beobachtung oder Erklärung ist, (.) aber dann hab ich da gelernt und jetzt hilft (.) also ist besser.
- Eh (.) eh it [content learning in the international class, MS] helps because eh normally I didn't know what observation or explanation is, (.) but then I've learnt there and now helps (.) hence is better.

4.4. "If I could turn back time..."

Full-integration into a regular class usually results in demoting to a lower grade (e.g. being in 8th grade and aged 16) or changing schools. Since the German school system is divided into different schools varying in their requirements and possible diploma, students with a lack of content knowledge often have to attend lower secondary school instead of a grammar school. Some students express feelings of betrayal, saying that the teacher did not emphasize a possible change in schools when students had not caught up in content knowledge. They aim to receive a good diploma but are hindered because they were kept in the international class.

- P10** Ich versteh, dass wir nicht äh die Sprache können, aber trotzdem sollen wir in internationale Klasse und wir wollen auch ein Abitur schaffen.
- I understand that we don't eh know the language, but we still shall be in international class and we want to accomplish the A levels.

Nevertheless, some of the students were able to transition into the regular class because they made an effort to acquire German fast. Retrospectively, some of the "less successful" students compare their behavior to the supposedly successful students and regret that they did not study as hard. They advise new students to use this chance to quickly learn German:

- P14** Ja, dass der mehr äh Deutsch lernt und nicht einfach Spaß macht wie wir. (.) Wir haben am Anfang// am Anfang Spaß gemacht und wir wollten nicht Deutsch zu reden und lernen. (..) Und wir// der [Name eines neuen Schülers, MS], der ist (.) vier Monate oder drei Monate in der Schule und der kann gut Deutsch zu reden. Yes, that he eh studies more German and doesn't only make fun like we did. (.) We've done fun in the beginning// in the beginning and we didn't want to speak and learn German. (..) And we// the [name of a new student, MS], he is (.) four month or three month in this school and he can speak German well.

Feelings of regret seem to be especially high if the students had to change from a grammar (where the international classes of the project are) to a lower secondary school. One participant blames herself for not working hard enough at the old school, whereas, at the new school she attends a regular class and works hard to get a diploma.

- P6** So (4) an den andere IK ich wollte sagen (.) dass die Kinder müssen mehr aufpassen auf die Unterricht, ganz sicher [...] und mehr machen und mehr lernen (..) weil als ich in IK war, ich hab gesagt (.) //also manchmal fühl ich mich „Oh, du warst so dumm. Du hast nicht viel wie hier gemacht. Wenn du hast so viel wie hier gemacht, dann konntest du da bleiben, warum hast du so dumme Sachen gemacht?“ So (4) at the other international classes I wanted to say (.) that the children must pay more attention on the lessons for sure [...] and do more and study more (..) because when I was in international class, I've said (.) //well sometimes I fell “Oh, you were so dumb. Du did not study much as here. If you did as much as here, then you could have stayed there, why did you do such stupid things?”

5. Discussion

When looking at the interview data, it is straightforward that the project “Biology for Everyone” has a solid theoretical framework based on CLIL, the scientific method with emphasis on action-oriented experiments, the work from action to erudite language, and the focus on the national science curriculum. Students value this approach since it helps them understand scientific concepts without struggling with potential language barriers (Schmiedebach & Wegner, 2018b, 2019b). We acknowledge the importance of teaching content in the international class; eventually the students feel confident to participate in regular science classes even though they are anxious in other subjects. This indicates that the CLIL concept is suitable and that choosing topics from the regular science curriculum is reasonable. Even though it is not possible to cover every topic, the students learn about concepts and subject-specific linguistic characteristics. The most dominant aspect in science is writing a lab protocol; by introducing helpful tips on how to write a protocol, the students can apply this to other topics. Therefore, former students in our project experience advantages in content knowledge, subject-specific language, and the confidence needed to participate in the regular classroom. Further research needs to examine if this is a common mind-set for students participating in our project and if this method could be used in other subjects, such as math, English, and social studies (Birnbaum et al., 2018).

In our interviews, we discovered the trend that many students prefer the international class over the regular class, for distinct social reasons. It simply could be easier to make friends; these students feel strong bonds with one another as they experience feelings of being supported while they deal with similar struggles within the group, and they all have comparable goal-oriented personalities as they are all learning German together. As participant 14 says “no matter who is or what you are, where you are from, it doesn’t matter. (.) Because we are all foreigners.” As most of these students are refugees, they have faced related hardships and can sympathize with one another. They are encouraged by their peers and their teacher to use German from unbiased perspectives, allowing them to express themselves without social repercussions.

Additionally, an interactive and empathetic teacher trained to teach international classes may give them added one-on-one time. As international classes usually have a smaller number of students, teachers can tailor the words and expressions they use, allowing them to simplify it enough for all students to understand. This also allows for more time to learn the language, even though subject-specific content still has to be taught. In regular classes, there are often more students, limiting the time for a teacher to give individual support during the lesson (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013). Further research should look at feedback from students who have immediately integrated in the regular classes, to identify supportive and beneficial structures a teacher could use (e.g. giving international students extra days to work on tasks to ensure enough time for preparation, implementing a buddy system with fellow classmates).

However, students who have participated in our project recommend starting the integration process early. They argue that learning alongside their German peers allows them to have a better chance at being integrated and that “there are eh no distinctions eh between foreigners and eh Germans” (participant 4). In this case, they are not seen as an “alien element” as it might be if they were only taking part in the class for a few hours each week (Nilsson Folke, 2017).

A quick integration into a regular class may result in faster language acquisition because foreign students greatly increase their contact with peers speaking their mother tongue. In international classes, it is often the case that those coming from similar countries group up and speak their L1 together (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013). This is helpful in many situations, such as allowing them to explain concepts more easily to their peers in group work. Therefore, the students are encouraged to use all of their linguistic resources to acquire the new language (Hornberger, 2005). Participant 4 states that it is normal to use their native language in the international class simply because it is easier. However, speaking German early on in a regular class with German peers is also positive to her because “when you live in another country, where the language is important, you have to learn it”. Therefore, one can argue that although being in an international class is often portrayed as a safe-space, it is also

reasonable to start an early integration process. When being well-integrated as a “normal” member of the class, they value the regular class and highlight the chances for their language acquisition. In the mainstream classroom the students usually have to speak German, whereas they often use their mother tongues in the international class.

6. Conclusions

As a result of our project, we recommend to use subject-specific content in order to prepare international students to integrate into the regular classroom. Science is an excellent start, because there are a lot of available hands-on and action-oriented experiments (Blumberg & Niederhaus, 2017). However, we argue that subjects such as social studies and math should be included as well. We also concur that students should be quickly integrated into regular classes, with additional language lessons to continue language learning (Fasse, 2018). This would help to decrease the “potential of regret”, as students would interact with their German peers early on, and in turn, this would inform them about the educational system and future requirements.

We hope that our project contributes to easing the transition of international students into the education system. These students value the chance at getting a “normal” education with traditional content learning and do not want to feel isolated and alone (Birnbaum et al., 2018). It is critical to approach this situation early; there is the danger of creating a “lost generation” with recently immigrated students who did not receive a diploma, as this is often the criteria for holding a job. Without immediately tackling this dilemma, a long-term problem is presented. It becomes harder for refugees and their future generations to integrate and have equal living standards. Our study only scratches the surface, thus further studies are required to investigate supportive structures such as additional language courses or individual help with content learning that an educational system has to offer for international students to integrate into the regular classroom.

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